

Lowell Boileau
sits in front of his
painting titled
"On Her Own."

The cars are
sleek, all looking
the same, the
products of robots
both human and
mechanical. At
far right is
Boileau's "Fire
and Flood."



MADE IN AMERICA

A Labor Day Special: Five artists whose talents were forged in the workplace.

BY MARSHA MIRO

STREET LITTER is colored by rusting car parts. Driving down I-75 becomes a dangerous game of chicken played with trucks carrying 20 tons of coiled steel bound for the assembly line. Local traffic jams are tied to shift changes at the closest plant. Dearborn is Ford,

Warren is Chrysler, Flat Rock is Mazda. Pontiac, Poletown and Flint are General Motors.

It's all around you in this town. The auto industry filters into every crevice of our lives.

Including the arts. Many painters and sculptors here are weaned on it. Some actually spend time on the line or in the smaller shops that support the auto plants. Other

artists absorb the factory culture unconsciously.

Using a variety of processes and materials, these artists create fascinating works that are rooted in industrial life. Some paint cars and workers. Others turn chun of metal into huge sculptures, junkyard truck gears into floating mobiles and old tools into haunted figures.

Over the years, hun-



the way he found a partial escape — he uses his factory skills to make sculpture rather than machines.

By the time Robert Hyde, 39, was old enough to work at the Chrysler plant in Warren during the early '80s, robots were winning all the entry-level jobs. Hyde got jobs on the outskirts of the industry — at the bar across the street, at a metal plating shop, a furniture factory. But there was no escaping the influence of the auto plant. His paintings and sculpture are like that, too. Part industrial, and part what he always wanted to be: a million miles away.

Theirs are classic Detroit stories.

And someday, when all the '57 Chevys are landfill, their art will be on display in some museum, somewhere.

Then someone old, someone wise, will stand in front of it and tell children who draw pictures with computers that artists made these things with their hands, with tools and machines, once-upon-a-time during the Great Industrial Age.

LOWELL BOILEAU paints unending lines of cars streaming along the streets of Detroit. He paints peaceful factories that look like Prince Charming's castle, spewing acrid, orange smoke. He paints the love/hate world of a big-city, big-bucks industry.

"Detroit is rich with what is happening to urban industrial societies, their decline and decadence," he said. His art gets its pungency from the hellfires and heavens of Dee-troit City.

Boileau's attraction to the auto culture began during college at Taylor University in Indiana in the mid-1960s. He came to Detroit in the summers to work in the factories. It was a good deal. He

got to know the Detroit Institute of Arts and made good money in eight crammed weeks.

Diego Rivera's murals of Detroit industry weren't just paintings on the walls for Boileau. He remembers liv-



ing them on one job. "I got transferred to the foundry. It was pure hell. It was 110 degrees, dirty and dark. We had to wear masks to filter the air so we could breathe."

The work was grinding, monotonous, and he hated it. But he liked the end product. "I like the individual freedom cars provide. But I don't know anything else that so determines politics, wealth, or work in our society."

Boileau paints our ambivalence. Sometimes he talks with a bit of Walter Reuther or Karl Marx in his voice. Then he lets his paintings do the organizing. He paints rows and rows of cars, all looking the same, the products of robots, both human and mechanical. They are sleek and aerodynamically designed, moving on the streets of decaying industrial cities, smartly decked out like foot soldiers of capitalism.

"The cars become a dehumanizing flow," he said.

"Driving the expressways at night you see some beautiful things. There is the slight sensation of flying with the steel and rubber beneath you."

**LOWELL
BOILEAU**

dreds of Michigan artists have forged connections between art and the auto. But the following five artists have gone beyond the incidental or predictable. All worked in a factory and took it to heart. Those experiences color their art like rust on an underbody.

Italo Scanga, 58, remembers the overwhelming heat on the line and has nightmares about punching his time card late — 40 years af-

ter he left the factory. He feeds his art with those nightmares.

Lowell Boileau, 46, spent a couple of years at the old International Harvester plant in Ft. Wayne, Ind., and at the Ford engine plant in Dearborn. His experiences gave him both an appreciation for the freedom of the car and a dislike for the economic domination of the auto industry. He reflects this contradiction in his

paintings.

Tom Bills, 42, figured out his technique on the line. Then he went to Yale to learn how to turn steel, iron and cement into art. Both educations meld in his work.

When Robert Hansen, 49, was fresh out of trade school in 1960, his father would take him to the welding shops in Warren to find work. He's been in the plants ever since. But along

But he also paints them at night, in a glamorous pink, orange and golden atmosphere. Bright flashes glint off the chrome. Light bounces off rain-slicked streets. You imagine the smell of new car upholstery. You could fall in love with an Edsel if it were in one of these paintings.

Here, Boileau is coloring the car with romance. He feels that, too. "Driving the expressways at night you see some beautiful things. There is the slight sensation of flying with the steel and rubber beneath you."

Boileau knows his subject well. He once drove a delivery truck for Sears, traveling to nearly every street in town. He is a creature of the city, now making a living from his art working out of a second-floor studio in his Highland Park house.

He picks up the pieces for a painting everywhere in the city. Walking to the corner, he might see a group of men talking on the sidewalk. Next day in the studio, he paints a picture of those men standing next to a burning trash can — the classic urban scene of guys "hanging out."

Boileau paints in a precise, intensive technique called micro-pointilism. He apprenticed more years than a doctor to learn its subtleties.

He creates images out of thousands of tiny dots, painted in layers of yellow, red and blue. Those basic colors blend optically into many different colors. He can get six shades of brown now. Ten years ago he was happy with one.

Boileau's paintings are exaggerated parodies — crowded expressways packed with oversize, cartoony cars. It is social satire, 1990s' style.

"I try to do a portrait of the times," he said. "The car is our most universal artifact."

WHEN HE WAS 15, LIKE SO many young men before him, Italo Scanga left his small Italian village to find work in the factories of Detroit.

Maybe he was too young, or too sensitive. Maybe the contrast was too stark — his cozy, handmade, small-town roots shoved up against the cold, mechanistic world of the plants. Whatever it was, the noise, the smells and the harsh intensity of the factories affected him.

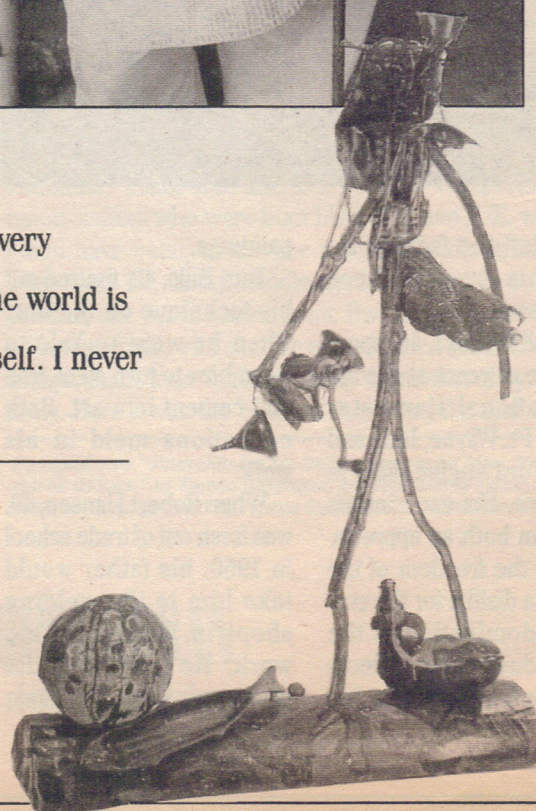
It haunts his dreams even now, 40



"The idea of repetition is not very interesting but the reality of the world is repetition. I always repeat myself. I never do one piece to a theme."

ITALO SCANGA

"Abundance," 79-by-56-by-15 inches



years later. It shapes his approach to work. It determines his choice of tools. And it is one reason his huge sculptures are frail figures, racked by his own insecurities.

Scanga lived in a boarding house on Mack Avenue during the '50s with his brother Nicholas. The two had come here together in 1948, leaving mama, papa, three sisters and a brother in Calabria. Italo would go to high school during the day, then take the bus to the Detroit Transmission plant for the evening shift. The assembly lines were hardly automated then. He drilled screw holes with a hand tool, hundreds of holes a day.

"You become almost like a machine because you have to keep up," Scanga recalled. "You lose control because they speed up the line, slow it down, speed, slow, speed, slow."

Now Scanga doesn't use machines to make his art, but only tools he can control. "I still have dreams of the machinery getting me, that I'll be crucified on a machine."

This isn't overly-dramatic chatter. Scanga milks his fears and passions for his art. You can see them in his larger-than-life, carved and painted wooden figures. Faces have crude noses, slashes of black painted eyebrows, bleeding red mouths. Arms are too long, outstretched, crunched in or simply gone. Some have titles that include the word "fear." Fear of machines. Fear of television. Fear of Freud.

What else did the factory teach him? Repetition. The comfort of it. "The idea of repetition is not very interesting but the reality of the world is repetition. I always repeat myself. I never do one piece to a theme."

And he learned the value of schedules. He still checks into his studio promptly in the morning, almost as if he had a time clock to punch. He takes his breaks, and his lunch. He leaves about the time he would have completed his shift.

Scanga hasn't lived in Detroit for more than 30 years, since he graduated from high school here in the '50s. He studied art at Michigan State, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1960 and a master's degree in 1961. He has taught art at various colleges across the country and now lives in southern California.

Scanga is a familiar figure in the art world. His work has been exhibited

at the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Many of his latest works are made up of old hand tools, symbols of early technology. He builds a spindly man out of such things as a meat grinder or seed spreader, giving the tools new life. He brings the century full circle, convening past and present, tying them together before we start the next millenium.

His art is all of this, an amazing clash of colors, materials and images. It is modern man groping with the enormous changes of the Industrial Age.

ROBERT HANSEN PACES his speech and movements. There's no rush. It all gets said, it all gets done. Maybe being measured and calm is the way he survived the boredom of a lifetime working in the factories.

Still, the work itself hasn't solved the problem the last 14 years at the General Dynamics tank plant in Warren. Hansen likes the challenge of fixing the broken equipment. It's the long stretches of time in between that are boring.

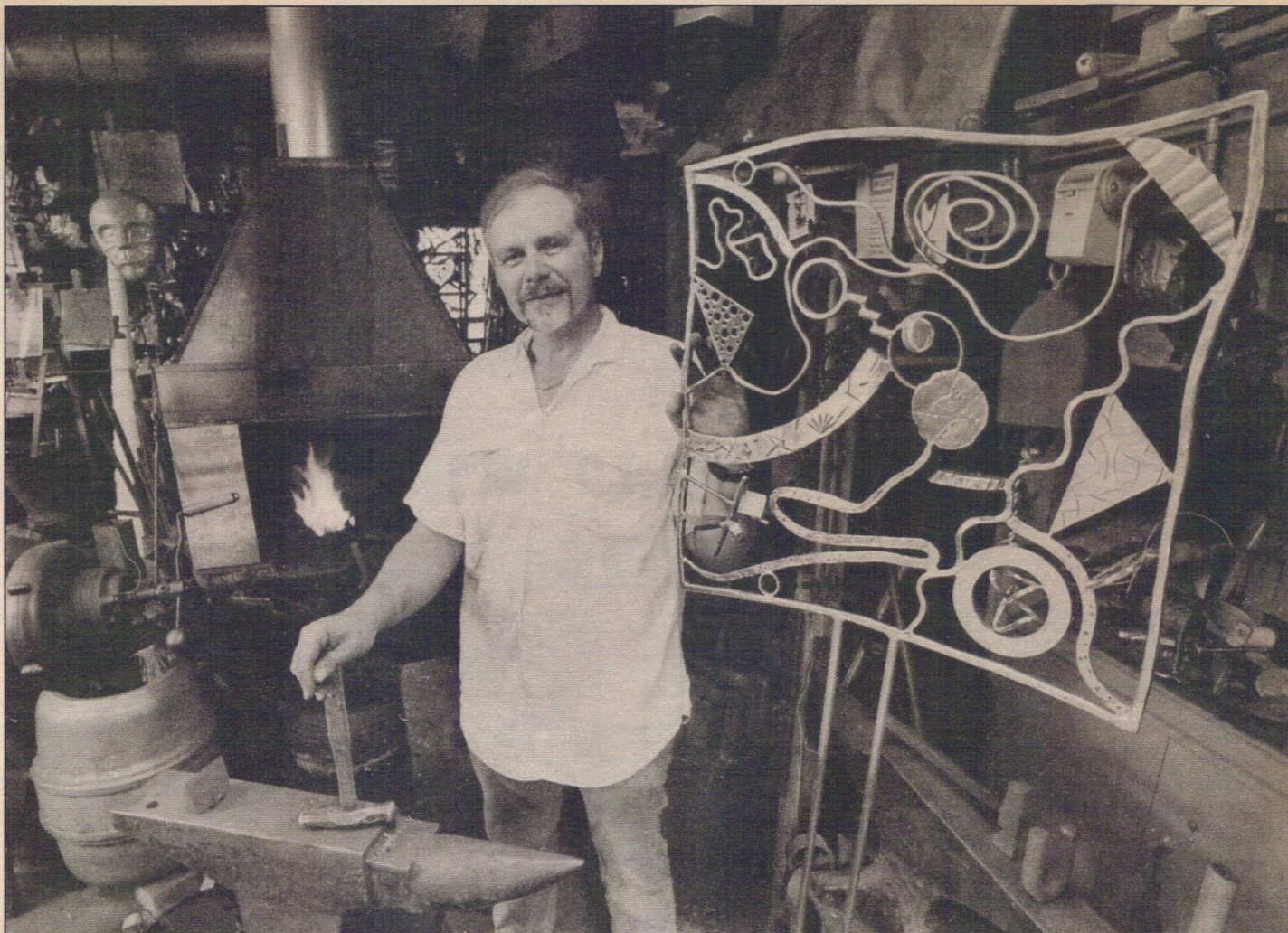
But he has a second life.

It began in 1976. "I've always been a collector of old tools," he explains, with characteristic understatement. Hansen doesn't just collect an occasional old tool — he pursues them. He has more than 20 different hammers, for example. He loves tools, and he is passionate about what he can do with them.

He bought an old anvil and started reading about how blacksmiths use them. The book was on decorative and sculptural ironwork. Hansen made everything decorative in it. Then he started on the sculpture.

"I made a figure," he said, and could see how I could change the form of a piece of metal from square to round and oval." He has been doing metal sculptures ever since.

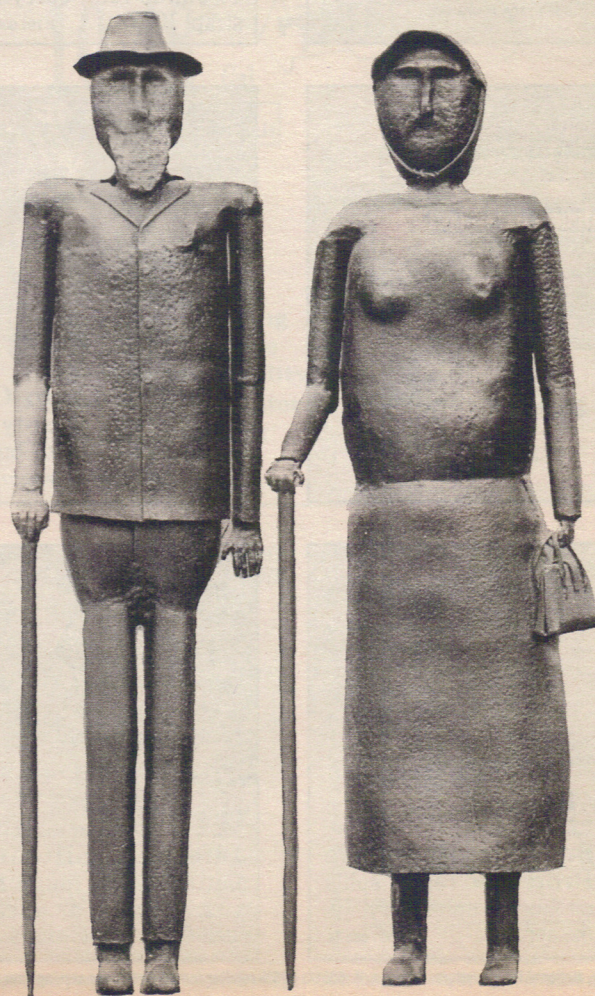
His sculpture is fresh and ten-



tative. It is a combination of the two Robert Hansens — the self-taught artist and the superb craftsman trained in the factory. He makes folksy human figures, which he designs himself and forges out of iron. They are sexless, raceless, faceless — a merging of all people. He also assembles old machine parts into sculptures that focus on the beauty of tools. The art gets better the deeper Hansen digs into himself, the closer he gets to understanding where he fits.

Hansen lives in an attractive home on Detroit's east side. His art is scattered here and there. He made the fireplace tools in the living room. There is also a tall candlestick that he made from an automobile camshaft. And out in the backyard, there are several metal sculptures.

But Hansen's real treasures are in his garage/studio. There are tools everywhere. Stacks of tongs in every size, ready to hold hot metal. Special stamps and cutters used to pattern and



"I made a figure, and could see how I could change the form of a piece of metal from square to round and oval ... I'd love to quit the factory. I'd love to be able to do this for a living. I don't think I ever will."

ROBERT HANSEN

Sculpture of an old man and woman.

shape. Rows of hammers hanging neatly on a circular carousel. "I made this one," he said as he picked up one hammer. "That's another nice thing. Blacksmiths can make almost everything they want."

This is a worker's place. His art dots the room: A primitive-looking hammered copper face mask. A wonderful steel cut-out arm. A carefully wrought, iron female figure with a round head and no face.

But it is the huge forge that dominates the room. This is where Hansen makes many of his pieces. He even made the hood of the forge itself, out of corrugated metal.

During the summer, it gets so hot inside Hansen's studio that he only dashes in for 15 minutes each hour. He works mornings, before his shift starts at the plant. He doesn't hurry. The more he makes, the more they pile up in his basement.

He makes faces and figures. They have a certain rough quality and are obviously not done by someone who drew hundreds of bodies in Art 101. Hansen taught himself. Mostly he looked at art books. "To learn yourself takes an awful lot longer. But I believe you can learn anything from books."

He goes to the galleries now. Knowing other artists helps. They teach him about art and he teaches them about blacksmithing. Few artists can match the finish of his welds. His sculptures look as though they've been made without any joints.

Hansen also assembles scrap material from throughout the city. He wired a bunch of old faucet handles together to make a small hanging screen. Now the handles dance against one another, no longer just factory leftovers. "They reminded me of snowflakes," he explained. The best of his work is like that; it has a whimsical elegance.

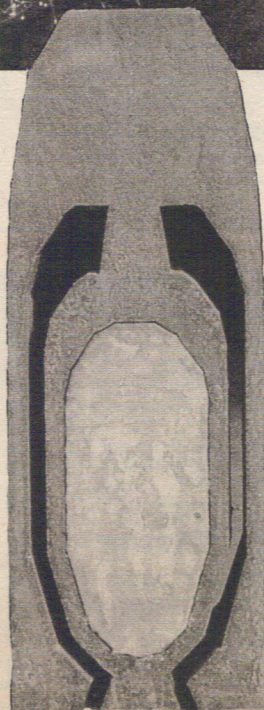
Hansen sells his art in various galleries around town. But he doesn't sell enough. "I'd love to quit the factory," he said. "I'd love to be able to do this for a living. I don't think I ever will."



NO ONE TOLD TOM BILLS he had talent. He just liked to draw.

He got a job as a draftsman at Dodge Truck in 1967, right out of Pershing High School. It wasn't glamorous stuff. He rendered sections of the car, flipped on edge to show how the metal parts fit together. And he did it with instruction manual precision. He could have kept at it for a lifetime. But Vietnam changed things.

After the war, Bills came home wanting more. He went to Oakland University, paying for tuition by working on the as-



"Just knowing how bolts are made is a valuable experience for a sculptor. In art schools you don't learn much technical stuff. The factories provided mine."

TOM BILLS

*"Standing at the End,"
30-by-11-by-8 inches*

sembly lines. He graduated in 1974 with a degree in English.

Ironically, it wasn't college that turned out to be the pivotal experience for Bills. Instead, sculpture got its edge from the things he picked up over four summers in the factories.

"Just knowing how bolts are made is a valuable experience for a sculptor," he said. "In art schools you don't learn much technical stuff. The factories provided mine."

He attached hoods to four-wheel-drive pickups at Dodge Truck. He worked with a team of men and an overhead crane. He had other jobs, too. One guy would lift a truck up with a lever; Bills would put on a bolt.

Teamwork, pacing himself, controlling massive materials—he learned all of that. And it is critical to his art. "Weight isn't an obstacle if you have the right tools," he said. "I just moved a sculpture that weighed 36 tons."

Bills' sculptures are sleek chunks of steel and iron that sit on the floor. They look like made versions of Stonehenge, or parts of old factories, or complex machine parts. They could be linchpins. Yet they are beautiful, sensuous and self-contained. You want to hug them, sit on them. The factories never produced anything like them. Are they a piece of the factory, or a product? Their function is to be mysterious.

Bills moved east after he had soaked up what he needed here, leaving Detroit in 1975. He studied at the Whitney Museum school in New York and then at Yale University. He has lived in New York ever since. He is a successful, full-time artist in that competitive environment.

Bills' greatest strength is his strangely poetic vision of industry. He wraps the auto culture up in a neat package. Before, New Yorkers had engineering feats, art, industrial structures as art and industrial stories in art. But they didn't have much industrial enigma, until Tom Bills.

He brought other things from Detroit as well. "The relationship of parts is the core of my

work. It is a basic law of nature that things have a reason to exist together." He learned that early on, drafting engine sec-

His studio looks like a small factory. He cuts his steel with a torch, helmet over his face. The parts are set together to form a cradle. Then he pours molten lead inside. The lead holds it together like the keystone, the last bolt. And the steel rusts, eventually, like any old car.

Bills still has strong connections to the Detroit area. His family lives in Warren. He likes the way Detroiters understand his art. "In New York people go into a gallery and draw from art history to explain something. In Detroit, there it is, the material forged together and sitting there. And bam! — people see it for that, what it is."

Like many autoworkers, Bills is ambivalent about his assembly line days. "It was awful work," he said, but, "a person has a real sense of security ... Every time I see an old Dodge pickup, I wonder if I put that bolt in it."

ROBERT HYDE NEVER worked in an auto plant, but he was born with the industry coded in his genes.

His architect father worked for GM. His inventor grandfather worked for Henry Ford. So did his grandfather's three inventor brothers. Hyde moved to Warren when he was 3. "Everybody you know works for Chrysler in Warren," he said.

But Hyde didn't fit into this world. He worked in a furniture factory for just 10 weeks. He remembers the workers with missing fingers and the sawdust that gave him a lung infection.

He also did a stint at a metal fitting shop. Of that he says, "It was pretty noxious, not the greatest environment."

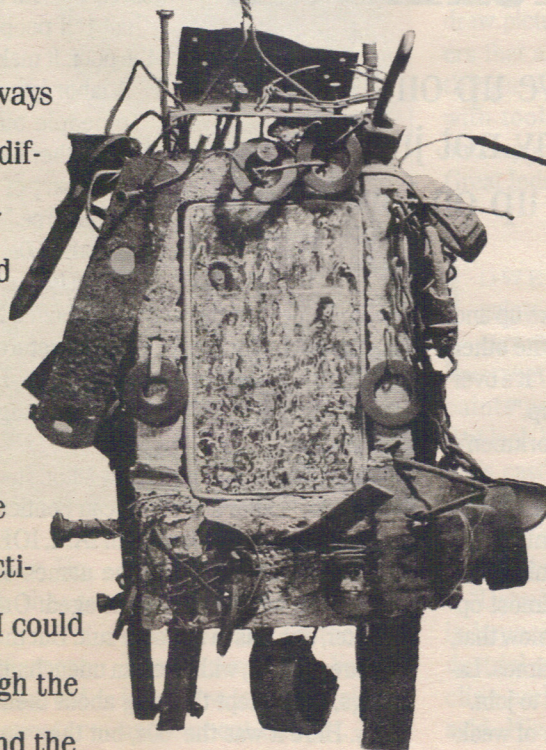
He has many friends in Warren who work in auto plants. He likes them, they like him. They like his paintings and buy them. "But I was always a little too dif-



"I was always a little too different. I always looked at things mechanically. How things were made, practically. And I could walk through the fields behind the factory and find cast-off materials."

ROBERT HYDE

Painting framed in aluminum



ferent. I always wanted to be an artist and I knew I could be."

Still, Hyde couldn't escape the influence of his upbringing amidst the auto plants. "I always looked at things mechanically. How things were made, practically. And I could walk through the fields behind the factory and

find cast-off materials."

Hyde's art is about the conflict between illusion and truth. He depicts this conflict in his sculptures and paintings.

He surrounds his paintings with aluminum frames that he casts like a car engine and then embeds with various debris. The paintings themselves always depict sensuous female figures, multitudes of mythical sirens from legends of yore. Captured, literally, by the metal frames, the women seem even more surreal.

Hyde is a full-time artist, living near downtown Detroit. He grew up in a house where his dad built everything. Creativity was prized. He still won't throw anything out.

Instead, he walks the streets of the city, looking for junk for his art. He embeds an old bowling trophy, nails and knives into his frames.

They are like dead weights of beautiful grunge — the trapped city. An archeologist could excavate in them.

Hyde is currently working on his second graduate degree, in

art history, at Wayne State. His first master's was in art.

He casts his sculptures at the Wayne State foundry. The process is the same as the one GM uses to cast engine blocks: Make a mold of Styrofoam. Pour in the glittering aluminum. Let it cool. Then break away the mold.

Hyde sees the process as ritual. "It goes back to our origins when people worked with fire."

MARSHA MIRO is the Detroit Free Press art critic.

Further information about these artists and their work can be obtained from the following:

ITALO SCANGA: Susanne Hilberry Gallery, 555 S. Woodward, Birmingham; TOM BILLS: Feigenson/Preston Gallery, 796 N. Woodward, Birmingham; ROBERT HANSEN: Artspace Gallery, 534 N. Woodward, Birmingham; ROBERT HYDE: Michigan Gallery, 2661 Michigan, Detroit; LOWELL BOILEAU's paintings will be displayed next month at Detroit Artists Market, 1452 Randolph. His work is also currently on display in Chicago at the Gilman/Gruen Gallery, 226 W. Superior.